

Opinion Column: Save our dying hog industry

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Practically the entire Philippines now has cases of ASF or African Swine Fever except for places where they generally don't eat pork such as the BARMM Region or don't allow pig farms such as Metro Manila. According to information from the Bureau of Animal Industry, ASF has spread from seven regions in the Philippines last February to 15 regions out of a total of 17 regions in the country.

I don't wish to be a prophet of doom but if the situation is not put under strict control, we can all assume that our local pork industry will eventually meet its demise. More than half of the local hog production and majority of the hog farms in Central Luzon were wiped out in 2019 by the virus. On a personal note, I saw ASF kill my entire flock of 88 pigs in three weeks. Let us all do something about it!

To this day the only accepted remedy is destruction of infected hogs and closure of their facilities. While no medicine has ever been found or developed that could cure the terminal viral infection, Vietnam and United States experts have collaborated in developing an ASF vaccine that has posted better results than earlier attempts. In fact, the vaccine is reportedly being tested in

four to six hog farms in the Philippines to find out if the vaccine is really effective and "stable."

I placed emphasis on the term "stable" because I recently consulted with an expert in the animal industry as well as a doctor of veterinary medicine who cautioned me on my optimism and desire to spread the news about the vaccine. During my initial research I learned that Vietnam was about to distribute the vaccine to several farms in the country with emphasis on "close monitoring."

In other words, the vaccine was not your typical off the shelf product or something you can buy from your favorite animal health product outlets and DIY inoculation. According to my source, the vaccine is a "live vaccine" which means it is designed to prevent ASF infection, BUT if used or handled wrong, it could turn into a source of ASF or trigger an outbreak. Sorry, it's too technical but it's like a biological weapon that, if not applied properly, could go wrong.

If the excess material and containers are not handled and disposed of properly, it could be like having a sleeper agent in your premises. My veterinary advisor added that the inoculated hogs have to be monitored from treatment all the way to disposal, especially since it's a new vaccine being introduced into animals intended for slaughter and human consumption. With the intention of inoculating millions of hogs in the future, how exactly do we monitor, regulate and control the program, and that does not even discuss the retail cost of the vaccine that might be unavailable and unaffordable to backyard farms that form 65 percent of producers.

If we want to help save the Philippine hog industry, the national as well as local authorities have to seriously work out an honest to goodness border control policy and system that address both international and local disease control concerns similar to what Australia does between its territories.

The industry players have already offered for free a 10-hectare property for the establishment of a "first border facility" or a screening and processing center for ASF, bird flu and other agri-related diseases.

However, the BAI shows no excitement or interest in receiving the property and building the much-needed facility. Is this indicative of the pro-importation mindset of officials of the DA and the BAI?

The urgency behind the first border testing facility is to put a stop to or at least slow down the entry of diseased or infected meats and fowl as well as animal-based feed additives derived from blood products and shredded parts. We cannot protect ourselves if we keep leaving “the gate open” for potentially diseased products to be imported. Ironical that the Bureau of Plant Industry personnel confiscated and interviewed flight attendants for hand carrying a few kilos of onions, but not the tons of meat and chicken imported from abroad.

The BAI and all LGUs need to make an audit of how many people or personnel are employed for the implementation of border control inspection and documentation. I am told that the DA and BAI have very few people on the ground because the DA’s priority has been on rice, sugar and politically sensitive products.

This severe shortage of qualified and trained personnel will be the one major reason why the ASF vaccine will be hard to introduce into the country. Who is going to monitor or police the use of such a product? As it is, the BAI and the DA can’t even monitor, much less control, the “mis-use” of food additives such as oils, dairy and soya by-products, etc.

I learned that such materials intended for use as mix in animal feeds are being channeled to use for human consumption and the shift presumably is one reason why animal feeds have gone up. This lack of monitoring can be intentional, as part of the corruption and technical smuggling that has caused billions of unpaid duties and taxes to the government.

In the end, the only possible way of saving the remains of the hog industry and protect the continued supply of pork is to establish “Grow and Eat Lokal” territories and banning the entry of non-locally produced livestock and products. This will increase the defense against disease, boost local agriculture and food production, particularly hog raising and poultry production, and will surely promote local dining while cutting out multi-layers of

agents and traders as well as reducing handling costs and carbon footprint.

It may be a “kanya-kanya/protectionist behavior, but either we save some or lose all!

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